

Message Text

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ACTION AF-06

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FM AMEMBASSY BAMAKO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3403

INFO AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN

AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY CONAKRY GIOT

AMEMBASSY DAKAR

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAMAKO 818

DAKAR PASS USDAO

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MPOL, ML, UR

SUBJ: THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MALI

SUMMARY:UNTIL RECENTLY MALI COULD HAVE BEEN CITED AS
A COUNTRY OF NO STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE WHATSOEVER. LAND-
LOCKED, ISOLATED AND DESPERATELY POOR, ITS MAJOR
INTERNATIONAL ASSET WAS ITS VOTE IN INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS. THE WAR IN ANGOLA, HOWEVER, HAS CHANGED
THAT. SOVIET AIRCRAFT FLYING SUPPLIES AND PERSONNEL
TO LUANDA MADE EXTENSIVE USE OF SENOU AIRPORT OUTSIDE
BAMAKO, PARTICULARLY ON THE RETURN FLIGHTS TO RUSSIA.

1. SOVIET AN-22 AND AN-12 CARGO AIRCRAFT TRAVELLING FROM
THE USSR TO SOUTHERN AFRICA VIA BUDAPEST AND ALGIERS

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HAVE THE OPTION OF REFUELING AT BAMAKO AND HEADING SOUTH,

RATHER THAN GOING FURTHER WEST TO CONAKRY. LIKEWISE ON THE RETURN LEG. THERE ARE ADEQUATE NAVIGATIONAL AIDS AT SENOU AIRPORT AND THE INTERNATIONAL OIL COMPANIES --SHELL, MOBIL, TEXACO--CAN SUPPLY FUEL, ALTHOUGH THEY DID RUN SHORT LAST DECEMBER. THERE ARE ALSO SEVEN TO EIGHT MONTHS OF CLEAR DRY WEATHER WITH NO RAIN. EVEN THE RAINY SEASON HERE DOES NOT CURTAIL FLYING TO AN APPRECIABLE EXTENT.

2. WITHIN MALI THERE ARE ANOTHER 37 AIRFIELDS, INCLUDING SIX WITH PERMANENT RUNWAYS. OF ADDITIONAL IMPORTANCE TO THE SOVIETS IS A CADRE OF MALIAN MILITARY OFFICERS AND CIVIL SERVANTS WHO HAVE BEEN TRAINED IN RUSSIA AND WHO SPEAK RUSSIAN. SOME OF THOSE CAME BACK WITH A PROFOUND DISLIKE OF THE SOVIET UNION; SOME DID NOT.

3. IN TERMS OF WHERE MALI MIGHT FIT INTO SOVIET STRATEGY FOR AFRICA, IT IS CLEAR THAT THE SOVIET BASE AT BARBERA, SOMALIA, AND PMJT AND AIRFIELD FACILITIES AT CONAKRY, GUINEA, ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY FACILITIES IN MALI. MALI'S MAIN ROLE IS TO PROVIDE FLEXIBILITY TO SOVIET PLANNERS. BAMAKO CAN RELIEVE OVERCROWING AT CONAKRY, AS WELL AS PROVIDE SAVINGS IN TIME AND RESOURCES ON FLIGHTS SOUTH. ASSUMING THE SOVIETS WILL MAINTAIN OR INCREASE THEIR PRESENCE IN ANGOLA, AND PERHAPS DO THE SAME IN MOZAMBIQUE, THIS WOULD PUT THEM IN A FAVORABLE POSITION TO PURSUE CONFRONTATION WITH RHODESIA AND SOUTH AFRICA. MALI IS NOT CRUCIAL, BUT IT FITS INTO THIS STRATEGY.

4. THE POLITICAL IMPORTANCE TO THE SOVIETS OF EXPANDED INFLUENCE IN MALI IS APPARENT FROM LOOKING AT A MAP. THERE EXISTS NOW A LOOSE POLITICAL AXIS BETWEEN ALGERIA, MALI AND GUINEA. THESE THREE STATES CUT A SWATCH FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN TO THE ATLANTIC, QTE OUTFLANKING END QTE, MODERATE SENEGAL, MAURITANIA AND MORROCCO. IT IS DIFFICULT TO ASSESS THE DEGREE OF POLITICAL COORDINATION BETWEEN ALGERIA/MALI/GUINEA, BUT THE ALGERIAN AMBASSADOR HERE, MOUSTAPHA BENEMAR, IS ACTIVE AND PERHAPS THE MOST CONFIDENTIAL

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INFLUENTIAL IN THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS IN BAMAKO. ALL THREE STATES SHARE A COMMONALITY IN SOVIET SUPPLIED WEAPONRY, AS WELL AS ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC TIES BETWEEN GUINEA AND MALI AND A COMMON RELIGION BETWEEN MALI AND ALGERIA. A NEGATIVE FACTOR HERE IS TRADITIONAL MALIAN FEARS OF ALGERIA, BUT THIS WORKS BOTH WAYS. MALI IS PROBABLY STILL THE LEAST RADICAL OF THE THREE AND ONE CAN EASILY FIND SENIOR OFFICIALS WHO FEAR SOVIET INFLUENCE AND UNDERSTAND THE NEED

FOR A WESTERN PRESENCE.

5. THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MALI TO THE SOVIETS IS PROBABLY ENHANCED BY MALI'S BANKRUPT CONDITION. THE COUNTRY CAN BARELY PAY ITS CIVIL SERVANTS OUT OF TAX AND CUSTOMS REVENUES. EXTERNAL AID--ROUGHLY 25-30PERCENT OF THE TOTAL BUDGET OF \$111 MILLION--IS REQUIRED TO PAY FOR EVERYTHING ELSE. THE SOVIETS DO NOT PROVIDE MASSIVE AID THE WAY THE FRENCH, WEST GERMANS, EC AND CANADA DOES. THE SOVIETS ARE, HOWEVER, RESPONSIVE TO REQUESTS FROM THE MALIAN LADERSHIP. WHEN DEFENSE MINISTER KISSIMA DOUKARA COULD NOT FINANCE A C-130 FOR HIS PARATROOPERS, THE RUSSIANS CAME UP WITH AN ANTONOV-26. THE MALIANS ALSO CONSIDER THE RUSSIANS MORE RELIABLE THAN THE AMERICANS BECAUSE THE U.S. IMMEDIATELY EMBARGOED ALL US ARMS SHIPMENTS TO MALI WHEN ARMED CLASHES BROKE OUT ON THE MALI-UPPERVOLTA BORDER IN NOV.-DEC. 1974. THE FRENCH SENT ARMS TO THE VOLTANS, AND THE RUSSIANS, OF COURSE, INCREASED ARMS SHIPMENTS TO MALI. THOSE SHIPMENTS ARE CONTINUING. MALI'S CHRONIC FINANCIAL PROBLEMS WILL CONTINUE TO PROVIDE THE SOVIETS OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE THEIR INFLUENCE.

6. AS FOR THE FUTURE, THE SOVIETS MAY HAVE THEIR EYE ON AN AUXILIARY AIRBASE IN MALI. WE DO NOT KNOW. SECRECY WOULD PROVIDE AN ADDITIONAL MOTIVE. ALTHOUGH PHOTOGRAPHY IS PROHIBITED AT SENOU AIRPORT, THERE WAS LITTLE ANYBODY COULD DO LAST NOVEMBER 24 WHEN A DELEGATION OF 35 U.S. CONGRESSMEN, THEIR WIVES, AND TREASURY OFFICIALS DEBARKED NEXT TO AN AN-22 AND TOOK ALL THE PICTURES THEY WANTED.

7. THE WEST GERMANS IN BAMAKO BELIEVE THAT MALI IS A KEY STATE IN THE REGION AND THAT IF MALI CAME COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL

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UNDER SOVIET INFLUENCE, OTHER NEIGHBORING, BUT WEAKER COUNTRIES SUCH AS UPPER VOLTA AND NIGER, BUT ALSO THE IVORY COAST AND SENEGAL, WOULD HAVE TO REALIGN THEIR THINKING ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES. THE GERMANS PROVIDED \$24 MILLION IN AID IN 1975. THE FRENCH PROVIDE EVEN MORE, PERHAPS AS MUCH AS \$60-70 MILLION A YEAR. BUT FOR THEIR OWN POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL REASONS. NEITHER THE FRENCH NOR THE GERMANS ATTEMPT TO INFLUENCE MALIAN FOREIGN POLICY ON OTHER THAN SPECIFIC BILATERAL ISSUES.

8. CONCLUSION: AS A RESULT OF THE ANGOLAN CIVIL WAR, AND INCREASING AFRICAN AND SOVIET INTEREST IN CONFRONTING RHODESIA AND SOUTH AFRICA, MALI HAS ACQUIRED A DEGREE OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE. IN NO SENSE IS MALI PIVOTAL, BUT WE BELIEVE THAT SOVIET FREEDOM TO USE MALI'S AIRSPACE,

AIRFIELDS, AND PEOPLE WILL ADVANCE SOVIET INTERESTS IN
FURTHERING POLICIES WHICH RUN DIRECTLY COUNTER TO OUR
OWN--VIOLENT, VERSUS PEACEFUL, CHANGE IN SOUTHERN
AFRICA.
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